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ABSTRACT

Despite the existence of the "Newspaper in Education" program in many elementary and secondary schools, this Digest suggests newspapers remain an often overlooked resource which can be incorporated into almost any teaching curriculum, and which is particularly useful for teaching older remedial students and adults. It discusses some ways in which newspapers can be used in teaching language skills and basic literacy to adults and learning disabled students, as well as to students of English as a Second Language. The Digest concludes that the newspaper can be a versatile, inexpensive, and effective instructional tool to use in the classroom and that its currency and its availability outside the classroom make it relevant and "real" material for adult learners to use. (Contains 14 references.) (RS)

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Newspapers as a Teaching Resource for Adult Learners

by Nola Kortner Aiex

Despite the existence of the "Newspaper in Education" (NIE) program in many elementary and secondary schools, the newspaper remains an often overlooked resource which can be incorporated into almost any teaching curriculum, and which is particularly useful for teaching older remedial students and adults. This Digest discusses some ways in which newspapers can be used in teaching language skills and basic literacy to adults and learning disabled students, as well as to students of English as a Second Language.

Adult Learners

Newspapers can be a valuable tool for teachers who work with adult education students. Fenholt (1985) outlines a series of activities that employ the newspaper as a learning resource to develop both reading and life skills. Her contention is that regular elementary level reading materials fail to motivate readers at the adult level and might be embarrassing for some adults to use. She sees the newspaper as a more comfortable instructional fit for adult learners. Fenholt's activities booklet is aimed at adults who want to read on an intermediate level and pass the graduate equivalency diploma (GED) test.

Fenholt's observation that adults might be more comfortable learning with a newspaper than with instructional materials aimed at children is borne out in the case studies in a United Nations publication, "Newspapers in Adult Education: A Sourcebook" (1998). According to the sourcebook, many countries (including Argentina, Cameroon, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and South Africa) promote newspaper-education partnerships to improve the education of their adult citizens. The 10 cases presented in the sourcebook offer examples of how partnerships between educators and newspapers can play an active role in making adult education more attractive and effective and in preparing informed citizens. Mohanty's "Adult Education: Some Reflections" (1989), a compilation of articles about adult education in India, also highlights this type of "non-formal education in the learning society," as he calls it. One article specifically considers rural newspapers and their role in lifelong learning and post literacy (Schmetzer, 2000).

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"Between the Lines: A Basic Skills Newspaper Pack" (1994), from England's Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit, incorporates source materials from local and regional newspapers from different parts of the United Kingdom into many types of learning activities to develop literacy skills. The activities pack has been developed in an open learning format and may be used for assignments, development of skimming and scanning skills, individual study, and development of indexing skills.

Some of the practical activities suggested in Fenholt's article and "Between the Lines" include those designed to promote an understanding of coupons, want ads, news stories, and maps, as well as activities designed to build a better vocabulary. One of Fenholt's exercises, "Decode the Ads," deals with deciphering abbreviations commonly used in classified advertisements. Her unit on news stories uses questioning techniques to elicit information on what happens in the story. An exercise that uses weather maps asks the student to begin by putting a mark on the general location in which he or she lives. It then asks the student to find newspaper stories pertaining to places on the map, or in other words, stories about local, state, national, and international news. A similar activity is delineated in Kathryn Jackson's "Window on the World: Map Skills and Current Events" in "The Exchange—Best Teaching Practices from around Ohio. Teacher to Teacher" (1995), a compendium of adult literacy practices. The activity involves the choice of four geographical sites each week from newspaper articles or student requests. Class discussion then revolves around why the site was in the news.

Carolyn Hunter and Janice McNearney (1988) have designed a series of 12 lessons that use the newspaper in an adult basic education curriculum. Each lesson focuses on a particular letter of the alphabet and furnishes a list of vocabulary needed for the lesson, extensive hints on how to teach it, and suggested activities. Bill Graham's "The Tutor's Toolbox" (1996) contains 25 useful techniques for teaching literacy. It is designed for basic literacy instruction but may also be used in English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction. One of the suggested techniques uses the newspaper for brief reading workouts, especially with adults.

A module developed by Ed Kissam and Holda Dorsey (1997) may be used as the basis for a workshop or as a special topic unit in adult basic education or ESL courses—it addresses how to access and use information resources to function in the workplace and in daily living. Topics include:

analyzing newspaper articles; accessing information on the Internet; and evaluating the reliability of information.

In some cases, individual newspapers have also developed their own programs for adult literacy (Chandler, 1988). The "Tulsa World," for example, introduced a program called "Read Up," which combined use of the daily newspaper with a telephone hotline to provide tutoring help for adults of low reading ability. A group of prison inmates served as a test group for this program. They were tested for reading ability before beginning the 12-week program and again at its conclusion. Results indicated substantial gains in vocabulary, comprehension, and reading skills–one inmate advanced by two grade levels. Some newspaper corporations have in-house literacy programs that use their own publications as resources. The "Palm Beach Post" newspaper in Florida provided a workplace literacy program with six classes in three different programs: adult basic education, English as a Second Language, and high school equivalency in preparation for a GED diploma (Howden, 1990). Participating employees receive work-release time or are paid to attend class. There is also a bonus plan for employees whose skills improve to certain levels, culminating in a $250 bonus for passing the GED exam. The Post's goals as a business in providing literacy programs are: (1) increased productivity; (2) improved safety, precision, and communications; and (3) reduced turnover and continued employment and advancement for people whose jobs might otherwise be in jeopardy.

English as a Second Language Students and Learning Disabled Students

Many of the activities using newspapers for improving basic literacy can also be used with students of English as a Second Language (ESL). In one case of instruction targeting nonnative speakers of English, a practicum was developed by Janice Cohen (1994) to provide a curriculum to improve English skills and a knowledge of American culture in the adult ESL speaker. The 12-week curriculum was devised to teach grammar and language skills within the context of humorous and relevant stories about daily living and was implemented with 19 adult students. The newspaper was used as one instructional tool, among others. Results of the practicum were favorable, and student achievement levels increased.

Among other students who can benefit from using the newspaper in the classroom are older learning disabled (LD) students. Like adult education students, they often "experience frustration and failure with traditional approaches to content area instruction," according to Monda, Vail, and Koorland (1988). They contend that the newspaper can be helpful for the LD instructor who wants to create an individualized instructional program, since it can appeal to students who are not easily motivated. The authors advocate using teaching strategies that target specific learning skills in reading, language arts, and in mathematics.

Some of Monda, Vail, and Koorland's suggestions include: (1) using words in newspaper grocery ads, sports sections, or comics to teach alphabetizing; (2) using news stories to teach grammar; (3) having students make charts or collages of words dealing with the five senses; (4) asking students to select a picture or photograph and then to write their own accompanying stories; (5) having students make a timeline of current events; (6) asking students to write their own classified ads; (7) discussing the key elements of a book or movie review; and (8) asking students to design their own newspaper to report events happening in class or in school. The "Open to Suggestion" column in the April 1991 issue of "Journal of Reading" also presents class activities using comics and cartoons for adults with reading difficulties to improve content reading.

The newspaper can be a versatile, inexpensive, and effective instructional tool to use in the classroom. Certainly its currency and its availability outside the classroom make it relevant and "real" material for adult learners to use.

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